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DEPARTMENT FOR AF AND AF/E
LONDON, PARIS, ROME FOR AFRICA WATCHER
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SUBJECT: ETHIOPIA'S PARLIAMENTARY SPEAKER OUTLINES RECENT
INSTITUTIONAL REFORMS

11. (U) SUMMARY. Ethiopia's Speaker of Parliament, Ambassador Teshome Toga, outlined for the Ambassadors' Donor Group (ADG) parliamentary reforms being implemented. Significant reforms included: the right of the opposition to propose agenda items and bills without securing a minimum number of sponsors; monthly questioning of the Prime Minister; and creation of oversight committees to uphold the new parliamentary reforms.

Teshome said the opposition had yet to either take advantage of the new reforms or to propose agenda items. It is clear from Teshome, and our private discussions with the opposition, that lack of capacity (including lack of staff, office space, and information on issues under debate) remains a severe challenge for Parliament. The new reforms are based on assistance primarily from India, with support from Germany and the U.K. The ADG proposed a professional research service, similar to the Congressional Research Service in the U.S., which could provide all members information, as well as legal and technical expertise, to allow parliamentarians to debate issues and propose bills with greater confidence and deeper insight. END SUMMARY.

NEW REFORMS

12. (U) Thirty ambassadors from the ADG met February 7 with Ethiopia's Parliamentary Speaker on recent reforms implemented by Parliament. The reforms were developed in consultation with India, Germany, and the U.K. The Speaker explained that he had visited India, which served as a fundamental basis for Ethiopia's reform program. Ambassador Teshome highlighted several reforms as significantly enhancing democratic values and protecting the rights of the opposition. For example, any member of parliament may now propose a bill for referral to one of thirteen committees for deliberation. Whereas twenty sponsors had been needed before, now each Parliamentarian can propose a bill without sponsorship. In addition, opposition members will be represented on every committee.

13. (U) Teshome said there would be "opposition day" to allow opposition members to propose agenda items and determine the priority of agenda issues to be debated. Thus far, the Speaker noted, the opposition had not taken advantage of this new procedure. He noted that when the Prime Minister opens both houses of Parliament, Parliamentarians may propose amendments and opinions on the agenda outlined by the Prime

Minister, to be voted on by the Parliament.

¶4. (U) Parliamentary committees could now question Ministers weekly, and the Prime Minister monthly, Teshome said. Members of Parliament were now able to select the Speaker and Deputy Speaker by direct election, and anyone could run for those offices.

¶5. (U) Two new committees will be created. Similar to the House Ways and Means Committee in the U.S., or to the Business Committee in India, Ethiopia's Business Committee will establish the work agenda, set time for debate on bills, and determine when bills come to the floor for a vote. The second committee is the Public Accounts Committee, analogous to an inspector general, which will conduct investigations, determine whether procedures are being followed, and review budgets and expenditures.

NEED FOR CAPACITY-BUILDING

¶6. (U) The Speaker noted that the critical challenge facing the Parliament was resources and capacity-building. For example, there were 547 members of the Parliament, but few had any staff aides. While the Speaker had a single aide, other members worked without assistance. Other problems included lack of office space for members, and lack of information to help members make informed decisions on bills under debate. ADG members suggested establishing a professional research service (similar to the Congressional Research Service) to provide members basic information on issues, as well as provide technical and legal information to

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help members judge the consequences of bills under debate.

¶7. (SBU) COMMENT: The reforms are significant, making Parliamentary procedures more open than those prior to the May 2005 national elections--a request the U.S. and international community had made to the GOE. But the reforms need clarification: specifically, how committee membership will be determined, and the criteria for selecting opposition members of the committees. In our private conversations with the opposition leadership, we pressed them to develop a "vision" of what they stand for, a platform that would attract support. We noted to them that voters who supported the opposition in the last election did so in opposition of the ruling EPRDF, not necessarily out of support for the opposition. We will work with the opposition, Speaker, and ruling Parliamentarians during the parliamentary session, determining how far the new reforms can open and expand a transparent political dialogue and process. END COMMENT.
YAMAMOTO